

County passes wolf ordinance

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The Socorro County Board of Commissioners approved its wolf-human interaction ordinance before an overflow crowd at its meeting Tuesday morning.

The vote followed a public hearing where supporters and opponents both gave emotional pleas about the ordinance, which would prohibit the release of Mexican wolves in Socorro County as part of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program.

Socorro County Commissioner Danny Monette said he had to take into consideration the financial loss to ranchers from potential attacks on livestock before casting his vote in favor of the ordinance. Monette called the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's effort to carry out the Endangered Species Act "a broken system."

"First their goal was 100 wolves, then it was 300," Monette said. "I don't think they've given us really good answers."

Commissioner Martha Salas said she understood the need for wolves to improve the ecosystem, but said measures were needed, including improving compensation for ranchers for livestock killed and measures for protecting human safety, including coming up with fortified bus stops for children living in areas where the wolves are released.

All of the commissioners voted in favor of the ordinance.

Salas' sentiments about improving compensation echoed Speaker of the House Don Tripp's thoughts about the program.

Tripp said current compensation for livestock kills wasn't enough to cover the loss suffered by ranchers and farmers.

"We need to bring some common sense into it," Tripp said. "We need to look into ways to totally reimburse ranchers."

Catron County Commissioner Anita Hand told her Socorro counterparts that wolf attacks had cost ranchers in her county \$80,000 in 2015 alone.

"And that doesn't reflect the total economic impact," Hand said.

Compensation was one of the concerns voiced by rancher Deborah Tigner, who lives in an area where the wolves had been released. She said her family had not been compensated for cattle killed by wolves.

She said a U.S. Wildlife Service official was present when a wolf was eating a calf that was still warm.

Tigner said wildlife service officials later claimed it wasn't a wolf kill.

"We would like to be safe," Tigner said. "I have grandchildren who work our ranch. I would like them to be safe."

"We don't want the wolves killing our livestock," said Socorro County rancher Randall Major. "This is bad for families and bad for our economies."

John Wilson, who lives near Magdalena, said the degree of wilderness was what made living in Socorro County appealing, especially to retirees. He said the release of the wolves into the wild was part of the attraction.

He voiced a concern the ordinance could involve the county in litigation since it was going against the federal government's intention to release the wolves.

Wilson said he believed the passing of the ordinance was "going to be a legal mess."

"I don't want to foot the bill with my taxes," Wilson said.

Socorro County resident Matthew Mitchell expressed the belief the danger of the Mexican wolf expressed by those who supported the ordinance might be overstated.

He used his experience of helping feed the wolves at the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge's Wolf Management Facility to prove his point.

Mitchell mentioned feeding the wolves in an isolated location.

"You would think we were on a suicide mission," Mitchell said in response to some of the claims made by some of the people supporting the ordinance.

The U.S. Department of the Interior has granted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permission to release the wolves despite a decision by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to turn down the request earlier this year.

County Attorney Adren Nance told commissioners at an earlier meeting there was some question as to whether the ordinance was enforceable on federal land.

Commissioners were told again before the vote that the decision could face legal action.

If the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service goes ahead with plans despite state and local objections, it still could be some time before the wolves are released.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Public Affairs Specialist Jeff Humphrey said the process of the release was complicated, and steps in the process could be delayed.